

Urartian language

The **Urartian** or **Vannic** language was spoken by the inhabitants of the ancient kingdom of Urartu, located in the region of Lake Van, with its capital near the site of the modern town of Van, in the Armenian Highland, modern-day Eastern Anatolia region of Turkey.^[2] It was probably dominant around Lake Van and in the areas along the upper Zab valley.^[3]

First attested in the 9th century BCE, Urartian ceased to be written after the fall of the Urartian state in 585 BCE, and presumably it became extinct due to the fall of Urartu.^[4] It must have been replaced by an early form of Armenian,^[5] perhaps during the period of Achaemenid Persian rule,^[6] although it is only in the fifth century CE that the first written examples of Armenian appear.^[7]

| Urartian | |
|------------------------|---|
| | Vannic |
| Native to | Armenian Highland |
| Region | Urartu |
| Era | attested 9th–6th century BCE |
| Language family | Hurro-Urartian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Urartian |
| Language codes | |
| ISO 639-3 | xur |
| Linguist List | xur (http://multitree.org/codes/xur) |
| Glottolog | urar1245 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/urar1245) ^[1] |

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Classification

Urartian was an ergative, agglutinative language, which belongs to neither the Afroasiatic nor the Indo-European families but to the Hurro-Urartian family (whose only other known member is Hurrian).^[8] It survives in many inscriptions found in the area of the Urartu kingdom, written in the Assyrian cuneiform

script. There have been claims^[9] of a separate autochthonous script of "Urartian hieroglyphs" but they remain unsubstantiated.

Urartian is closely related to Hurrian, a somewhat better documented language attested for an earlier, non-overlapping period, approximately from 2000 BCE to 1200 BCE (written by native speakers until about 1350 BCE). The two languages must have developed quite independently from approximately 2000 BCE onwards.^{[10][11]} Although Urartian is not a direct continuation of any of the attested dialects of Hurrian,^[12] many of its features are best explained as innovative developments with respect to Hurrian as it is known from the preceding millennium. The closeness holds especially true of the so-called Old Hurrian dialect, known above all from Hurro-Hittite bilingual texts.

The external connections of the Hurro-Urartian languages are disputed. There exist various proposals for a genetic relationship to other language families (e.g. Northeast Caucasian languages, Indo European languages, or Kartvelian languages), but none of these are generally accepted.^[13]

Indo-European (namely Armenian and Anatolian, as well as Iranian and possibly Paleo-Balkan) etymologies have been proposed for many Urartian personal and topographic names, such as the names of kings Arame and Argishti, regions such as Diauehi and Uelikulqi, and cities such as Arzashkun, as well as some Urartian vocabulary.^{[14][15]}

Decipherment

The German scholar Friedrich Eduard Schulz, who discovered the Urartian inscriptions of the Lake Van region in 1826, made copies of several cuneiform inscriptions at Tushpa, but made no attempt at decipherment.^[16]

Schulz's drawings, published posthumously only in 1840 in the *Journal Asiatique*,^[17] were crucial in forwarding the decipherment of Mesopotamian cuneiform by Edward Hincks.^[18]

After the decipherment of Assyrian cuneiform in the 1850s, Schulz's drawings became the basis of deciphering the Urartian language. It soon became clear that it was unrelated to any known language, and attempts at decipherment based on known languages of the region failed.^[19] The script was finally deciphered in 1882 by A. H. Sayce. The oldest of these inscriptions is from the time of Sarduri I of Urartu, whose title was 'King of the Four Quarters'.^[16]

Decipherment only made progress after World War I, with the discovery of Urartian-Assyrian bilingual inscriptions at Kelišin and Topzawä.^{[19][20]}

In 1963, a grammar of Urartian was published by G. A. Melikishvili in Russian, appearing in German translation in 1971. In the 1970s, the genetic relation with Hurrian was established by I. M. Diakonoff.

Corpus

The oldest recorded texts originate from the reign of Sarduri I, from the late 9th century BCE.^[21] Texts were produced until the fall of the realm of Urartu approximately 200 years later.

Approximately two hundred inscriptions written in the Urartian language, which adopted and modified the cuneiform script, have been discovered to date.^[22]

Writing

Cuneiform

Urartian cuneiform is a standardized simplification of Neo-Assyrian cuneiform. Unlike in Assyrian, each sign only expresses a single sound value. The sign *gi* 𒄩 has the special function of expressing a hiatus, e.g. *u-gi-iš-ti* for *Uīšti*. A variant script with non-overlapping wedges was in use for rock inscriptions.



Hieroglyphs

Urartian was also rarely written in the "Anatolian hieroglyphs" used for the Luwian language. Evidence for this is restricted to Altintepe.

There are suggestions that besides the Luwian hieroglyphic inscriptions, Urartu also had a native hieroglyphic script. The inscription corpus is too sparse to substantiate the hypothesis. It remains unclear whether the symbols in question form a coherent writing system, or represent just a multiplicity of uncoordinated expressions of proto-writing or ad-hoc drawings.^[23] What can be identified with a certain confidence are two symbols or "hieroglyphs" found on vessels, representing certain units of measurement: 𒀸 for

aqarqi and ܶ for *terusi*. This is known because some vessels were labelled both in cuneiform and with these symbols.^[24]

Urartian cuneiform stone inscription on display at the Erebuni Museum in Yerevan. The inscription reads: *For the God Khaldi, the lord, Argishti, son of Menua, built this temple and this mighty fortress. I proclaimed it Irbuni (Erebuni) for the glory of the countries of Biai (=Urartu) and for holding the Lului (=enemy) countries in awe. By the greatness of God Khaldi, this is Argishti, son of Menua, the mighty king, the king of the countries of Biai, ruler of the city of Tushpa*

Phonology

Urartian had at least the following consonants, conventionally transcribed below:

Labial stops: p, b
Dental stops: t, d, ṭ
Velar stops: k, g, q
Sibilants: s, z, ʂ, ʐ
Gutturals: ?, ɬ
Sonorants: m, n, l, r

There were presumably also the semivowels /w/ and /y/.

As usual with ancient languages, the exact nature and pronunciation of the consonants are uncertain. As the table shows, the stops and the sibilants all display a three-way distinction between voiced, voiceless and "emphatic" consonants, but it cannot be ascertained what was special about the third groups of consonants, which were rendered with the Akkadian cuneiform signs for the Semitic emphatics. Perhaps they were glottalized or aspirated. The pronunciation of the sibilants is debatable, as it is for Akkadian; some may actually have been affricates.

The script distinguishes the vowels *a*, *e*, *i* and *u*. It is unclear whether there was an /o/ as well. There may have been phonemic vowel length, but it is not consistently expressed in the script. Word-finally, the distinction between *e* and *i* is not maintained, so many scholars transcribe the graphically vacillating vowel as a schwa: ə, while some preserve a non-reduced vowel (usually opting for *i*). The full form of the vowel appears when

suffixes are added to the word and the vowel is no longer in the last syllable: *Argištə* "Argišti" - *Argištešə* "by Argišti (ergative case)". This vowel reduction also suggests that stress was commonly on the next-to-the-last syllable.

In the morphonology, various morpheme combinations trigger syncope: **ar-it-u-mə* → *artumə*, **zaditumə* → *zatumə*, **ebani-ne-lə* → *ebanelə*, **turul(e)yə* → *tul(e)yə*.

Morphology

Nominal morphology

The morphemes which may occur in a noun follow a strict order: stem - article - possessive suffix - number and case suffix - suffixes received through Suffixaufnahme.

All nouns appear to end in a so-called thematic vowel - most frequently *-i* or *-e*, but *-a* and *-u* also occur. They may also end in a derivational suffix. Notable derivational suffixes are *-hə*, forming adjectives of belonging (e.g. *Abiliāne-hə* "of the tribe Abiliāni", *Argište-hə* "son of Argišti") and *-šə*, forming abstract nouns (e.g. *alsui-šə* "greatness", *ardi-šə* "order", *arniu-šə* "deed").

The forms of the so-called "article" are *-nə* (non-reduced form *-ne-*) for the singular, *-ne-lə* for the plural in the absolutive case and *-na-* for the other forms of the plural. They are referred to as "anaphoric suffixes" and can be compared to definite articles, although their use does not always seem to match that description exactly. They also obligatorily precede agreement suffixes added through Suffixaufnahme: e.g. *Argište-šə Menua-hi-ne-šə* "Argišti (ergative), son of Menua (ergative)". The plural form can also serve as a general plural marker in non-absolutive cases: *arniuši-na-nə* "by the deeds".^[25]

The well-attested possessive suffixes are the ones of the first person singular *-ukə* (in non-reduced form sometimes *-uka-*) and *-i(yə)* (in non-reduced form sometimes *-iya-*): e.g. *ebani-uka-nə* "from my country", *ebani-yə* "his country".

The plural is expressed, above all, through the use of the plural "article" (*-ne-lə* in the absolutive case, *-na-* preceding the case suffix in the oblique cases), but some of the case suffixes also differ in form between the singular and the plural. Therefore, separate plural version of the case suffixes are indicated below separately. The nature of the absolutive and ergative cases is as in other ergative languages (more details in the section Syntax below).

Absolutive: sing. *-Ø*, plur. *-lə*

Ergative: *-š(ə)*

Genitive: sing. *-i*, plur. *-wə*

Dative: sing. *-ə*, plur. *-wə*

Directive: sing. *-edə*, plur. (archaic) *-š-tə*

Comitative: *-ranə*

Ablative-instrumental: *-nə*

Ablative: sing. *-danə*, plur. *-š-tanə*

Locative: *-a*

Since the "complete" plural forms also include the plural definite article, they appear as *-ne-lə*, *-na-šə*, *-na-wə*, *na-(e)də* or *na-š-tə*, etc..

A phenomenon typical of Urartian is Suffixaufnahme - a process in which dependent modifiers of a noun (including genitive case modifiers) agree with the head noun by absorbing its case suffixes. The copied suffixes must be preceded by the article (also agreeing in number with the head). Examples: *Haldi-i-na-wə*

šešti-na-wə "for the gates (dative) of [god] Haldi (dative)", Argište-šə Mənu-a-ji-ne-šə "Argišti (ergative), son of Mənu (ergative)".

The known personal pronouns are those of the first and third person singular.

The first person singular has two different forms for the absolute subject: *ištidə* as the absolute subject of an intransitive verb, and *šukə* as the absolute object of a transitive verb. The ergative form is *iešə*. Judging from correspondences with Hurrian, *šu-* should be the base for the "regular" case forms. An enclitic dative case suffix for the first person singular is attested as *-mə*.

The third person singular has the absolute form *manə*.

As for possessive pronouns, besides the possessive suffixes (1st singular *-uka-* and 3rd singular *-iya*) that were adduced above, Urartian also makes use of possessive adjectives formed with the suffix *-(u)sə*: 1st singular *šusə*, 3rd singular *masə*.

The encoding of pronominal ergative and absolute participants in a verb action is treated in the section on *Verbal morphology* below.

Demonstrative pronouns are *i-nə* (plural base *i-*, followed by article and case forms) and *ina-nə* (plural base *ina-*, followed by article and case forms). A relative pronoun is *alə*.

Verbal morphology

The paradigm of the verb is only partially known. As with the noun, the morphemes that a verb may contain come in a certain sequence that can be formalized as a "verb chain": root - root complements (of unclear meaning) - ergative third person plural suffix - valency markers (intransitive/transitive) - other person suffixes (expressing mostly the absolute subject/object). It is not clear if and how tense or aspect were signalled.

The valency markers are *-a-* (rarely *-i-*) for intransitivity and *-u-* for transitivity: for example *nun-a-də* "I came" vs *šidišt-u-nə* "he built". A verb that is usually transitive can be converted to intransitivity with the suffix *-ul-* before the intransitive valency marker: *aš-ul-a-bə* "was occupied" (vs *aš-u-bə* "I put in [a garrison]").^[26]

The person suffixes express the persons of the absolute subject/object and the ergative subject. When both of these are present, a single suffix may express a unique combination of persons. The ascertained endings are as follows (the ellipsis marks the place of the valency vowel):

Intransitive verbs:

1st person singular: *-də*

3rd person singular: *-bə*

3rd person plural: *-lə*

Transitive verbs:

1st person singular (ergative) - 3rd person singular (absolute): *-bə*

1st person singular (ergative) - 3rd person plural (absolute): *-bə / -lə*

3rd person singular (ergative) - 3rd person singular (absolute): *-nə*

3rd person singular (ergative) - 3rd person plural (absolute): *-a-lə*

3rd person plural (ergative) - 3rd person singular (absolute): *-it-...-nə*

3rd person plural (ergative) - 3rd person plural (absolute): *-it-...-lə*

Examples: *ušt-a-də* "I marched forth"; *nun-a-bə* "he came"; *aš-u-bə* "I put-it in"; *šidišt-u-nə* "he built-it"; *ar-u-mə* "he gave [it] to me", *kuy-it-u-nə* "they dedicated-it".

As the paradigm shows, the person suffixes added after the valency vowel express mostly the person of *absolute* subject/object, both in intransitive and in transitive verbs. However, the picture is complicated by the fact that the absolute third person singular is expressed by a different suffix depending on whether the ergative subject is in the first or third person. An additional detail is that when the first-person singular dative

suffix *-mə* is added, the third-person singular absolutive suffix *-nə* is dropped. It should also be noted that the encoding of the person of the absolutive subject/object is present, even though it is also explicitly mentioned in the sentence: e.g. *argište-šə inə arə šu-nə* "Argišti established(-it) this granary". An exceptional verb is *man-*"to be", in that it has a transitive valency vowel, and takes no absolutive suffix for the third person singular: *man-u* "it was" vs *man-u-lə* "they were".

The imperative is formed by the addition of the suffix *-ə* to the root: e.g. *ar-ə* "give!". The jussive or third person imperative is formed by the addition of the suffix *-in* in the slot of the valency vowel, whereas the persons are marked in the usual way, following an epenthetic vowel *-[i]-*: e.g. *ar-in-[i]-nə* "may he give it", *ha-it-in-nə* "may they take it". The modal suffix *-l-*, added between the valency vowel and the person suffixes, participates in the construction of several modal forms. An optative form, also regularly used in clauses introduced with *ašə* "when", is constructed by *-l-* followed by *-ə* (*-i* in non-reduced form) - the following absolutive person suffix is optional, and the ergative subject is apparently not signalled at all: e.g. *qapqar-u-l-i-nə* "I wanted to besiege-it [the city]", *urp-u-l-i-nə* or *urp-u-l-ə* "he shall slaughter". A conditional is expressed by a graphically similar form, which is, however, interpreted by Wilhelm (2008) as *-l-* followed by *-(e)yə*:^[27] an example of its use is *alu-šə tu-l-(e)yə* "whoever destroys it". Finally, a desiderative, which may express the wish of either the speaker or the agent, is expressed by *-l-* followed by a suffix *-anə*; in addition, the valency marker is replaced by *-i*: e.g. *ard-i-l-anə* "I want him to give ...", *ha-i-l-anə* "it wants to take/conquer ...".

Negation is expressed by the particle *ui*, preceding the verb. A prohibitive particle, also preceding the verb, is *mi*. *mi* is also the conjunction "but", whereas *e'ə* is "and (also)", and *unə* is "or".

Participles from intransitive verbs are formed with the suffix *-urə*, added to the root, and have an active meaning (e.g. *ušt-u-rə* "who has marched forth"). Participles from transitive verbs are formed with the suffix *-aurə*, and have a passive meaning (e.g. *šidaurə* "which is built"). It is possible that *-umə* is the ending of an infinitive or a verb noun, although that is not entirely clear.

Syntax

Urartian is an ergative language, meaning that the subject of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb are expressed identically, with the so-called absolutive case, whereas the subject of a transitive verb is expressed with a special ergative case. Examples are: *Argišə nun-a-bi* "Argišti came" vs *Argište-šə arə šu-nə* "Argišti established a granary". Within the limited number of known forms, no exceptions from the ergative pattern are known.

The word order is usually verb-final, and, more specifically, SOV (where S refers to the ergative agent), but the rule is not rigid and components are occasionally re-arranged for expressive purposes. For example, names of gods are often placed first, even though they are in oblique cases: *Ḩaldi-ə ewri-ə inə E₂ Argište-šə Menuaħini-šə šidišt-u-nə* "For Ḵaldi the lord Argišti, son of Menua, built this temple." Verbs can be placed sentence-initially in vivid narratives: *ušt-a-də Mana-idə ebanə at-u-bə* "Forth I marched towards Mana, and I consumed the land."^[28] Nominal modifiers usually follow their heads (*erelə tarayə* "great king"), but deictic pronouns such as *inə* precede them, and genitives may either precede or follow them. Urartian generally uses postpositions (e.g. *ed(i)-i-nə* "for", *ed(i)-i-a* - both originally case forms of *edi* "person, body" - *pei* "under", etc..) which govern certain cases (often ablative-instrumental). There is only one attested preposition, *parə* "to(wards)". Subordinate clauses are introduced by particles such as *iu* "when", *ašə* "when", *alə* "that which".

Language sample

The sample below is from inscription 372 by Menua, son of Ishpuini, based on G. A. Melikishvili's corpus of Urartian Cuneiform Inscriptions.^[29]

For each sentence, the transliteration is given in Italic, the morphological transcription in bold, the translation in a plain font.

1. *d ḥal-di-ni-ni uš-ma-ši-ni* *DIŠ me-nu-a-še* *DIŠ iš-pu-u-i-ni-ḥi-ni-še* *d ḥal-di-ni-li* **KÁ** (3) *ši-di-iš-tú-a-li*

Ḥaldi=ni=nə ušma=ši=nə Menua=šə Išpuini=ḥi=ni=šə Ḥaldi=ni=lə KÁ šidišt=u=alə.

"Through Haldi's might, Menua, son of Ishpuini, built Haldi's gates."

2. *URU a-lu-di-ri-i-e* (4) *É.GAL ši-di-iš-tú-ni ba-du-si-e*

Aludiri=ə É.GAL šidišt=u=nə badusi=y=ə.

"For (the city of) Aludiri he built a fortress to its perfection (?)."^[30]

3. *d ḥal-di-ni-ni uš-ma-ši-ni* *d ḥal-di-ni-ni ba-a-u-ši-ni* *DIŠ me-nu-a-ni* *DIŠ iš-pu-ú-i-ni-e-ḥé i-ú* *LU a-te-i-ni e-si na-ḥa-a-be* *KUR ša-ti-ru-ú-ni du-ur-ba-i-e ma-nu*

Ḥaldi=ni=nə ušma=ši=nə Ḥaldi=ni=nə bau=ši=nə Menua=nə Išpuini=ḥə iu ate=y=n(ə)=ə esi=ə naḥ=a=bə, Šatiru=nə durbayə man=u.

"When, through Haldi's might and Haldi's command, Menua, son of Ishpuini, ascended to his father's place (i.e. throne), (the land of) Šatiru was rebellious."

4. *ḥal-di-ni uš-ta-a-be ma-si-ni šu-ri-e ka-ru-ni* *URU ḡu-ra-di-na-ku-ú-ni ka-ru-ni* *URU gi-di-ma-ru-ú-ni ka-ru-ni* *KUR ša-ti-ru-ú-i* *KUR e-ba-a-ni* *d ḥal-di-ni ku-ru-ni* *d ḥal-di-ni-e šu-ri-i ku-ru-ni*

Ḥaldi=nə ušt=a=bə masi=nə šuri=ə, kar=u=nə Ḥuradinaku=nə, kar=u=nə Gidimaru=nə, kar=u=nə Šatiru=yə ebanə. Ḥaldi=nə kurunə, Ḥaldi-ni-yə šuri kurunə.

"Haldi marched forth with his weapon(?), conquered Huradinaku, conquered Gidimaru, conquered the land of Shatiru. Haldi is powerful, Haldi's weapon(?) is powerful."

...

5. *ḥa-ú-ni* *URU ḡu-ra-di-na-ku-ú-ni* *URU gi-di-ma-ru-ú-ni* *ḥa-ú-ni* *KUR ša-ti-ru-ú-i* *KUR e-ba-a-ni-i* *URU tar-zu-’a-a-na-a-na-ni*

Ḥa=u=nə Ḥuradinaku=nə, Gidimaru=nə, Ḥa=u=nə Šatiru=yə eban=i=yə Tarzuana-nə.

"He (Menua) captured (the cities) Huardinaku, Gidimaru, Tarzuana of the land of Shatiru."

6. *ku-ṭu-ni pa-ri* *KUR bu-uš-tú-ú-e pa-ri* *KUR ma-al-ma-li-i-e*

Kuṭ=u=nə parə Buštu=ə, parə Malmali=ə.

"He reached as far as (the city of) Buštu, as far as (the city of) Malmali."

7. *URU ḡu-ra-di-na-ku-ú-ni ... a-ru-ni-e* *d ḥal-di-še* *DIŠ me-i-nu-ú-a* *DIŠ iš-pu-u-i-ni-e-ḥi-ni-e*

Ḥuradinaku=nə ... ar=u=nə Ḥaldi=šə Menua=ə Išpuini=ḥi=ni=ə.

Haldi gave (the city of) Huradinaku to Menua, son of Ishpuini."

See also

- [Urartu](#)
- [Hurrians](#)
- [Hurrian language](#)

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External links

- [Electronic Corpus of Urartian texts with English translations and general informations on Urartu and the Urartian written sources created by B. Christiansen on the basis of M. Salvini's Corpus dei testi urartei I–V](http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ecut.htm) (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ecut.htm>)
- [Russian-language scholarly publications on Urartu and the Urartian language; includes texts in Urartian](http://annales.info/i_urart.htm) (http://annales.info/i_urart.htm)
- [A Urartian glossary \(based on Die Urartäische Sprache: \(1971\) by G.A. Melikishvili](https://web.archive.org/web/20070812075829/http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2803/c-HURRIAN-URARTIAN-9_Urartian-Glossary.htm) (https://web.archive.org/web/20070812075829/http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2803/c-HURRIAN-URARTIAN-9_Urartian-Glossary.htm)

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